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The Impact of Asian Americans on U.S. Higher Education: Asian American Studies Movement

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I. Introduction

The representation of Asian and Pacific Americans in the US higher education has increased significantly over the last three decades. This phenomenon is in line with the dynamic increase of the Asian and Pacific American population through massive immigration during the same period (Escueta & O' Brien, 1989). The academic achievements of Asian and Pacific American students are forecasted to surpass those of other minorities and whites in the US (Mickelson et al., 1995). Because of this outstanding success in education, the media labeled them, "model minorities" ; however, this is a stereotypical view because many Asian and Pacific Americans do not fit this category (Escueta & O' Brien, 1989; Magner, 1993). But, still, "No matter how much people say the model minority is a myth, the perception is that without any help, without any programs, without any culturally relevant curriculum, the Asian American students are going to make it" (Professor Angie Fa of City College of San Francisco, quoted in Magner, 1993).

Whatever they may be called, from a macro perspective, it is possible to consider that Asian and Pacific American students have various impacts on American higher education with their increased presence on campuses.

American higher education also impacts Asian and Pacific Americans in ways such as upward social mobility. Certainly, it appears that US higher education and Asian Americans impact each other. However, in this paper, the focus will be placed on the former: those of Asian and Pacific American students on US higher education.

There are many ways to classify the impacts of Asian and Pacific American students on higher education. One of them will be by time frame: impact on admission policy and enrollment patterns, impact on curriculum and instruction, impact on social life patterns, impact on student organization and activities, impact on diversity and cross-cultural awareness, impact on academic environment and achievement, impact on retention and graduation (degrees conferred), etc. Among these possible impacts, specifically, this paper will discuss the impact on curriculum; namely, the movement toward the establishment of Asian American Studies.

It is important to note that the Asian and Pacific American group is incredibly diverse in terms of country of origin, social class, religion, language, cultural background, immigration status, and group history in the US (Mickelson et al., 1995). For example, Japanese and Chinese immigrants began to arrive in the US in the 1800' s, while Southeast Asians came to the US mostly as refugees in the last few decades (Mickelson et al., 1995). In addition, if we look at individual groups within Asian and Pacific Americans, they show various participation patterns in higher education, from the scale of representation, to the level of achievement, to the types of institutions where they are represented (Hsia & Hirano-Nakanishi, 1989). However, the movement for Asian American Studies is usually pursued by a whole group of Asian and Pacific Americans: therefore, its internal diversity will not be an important issue here.

In this paper, first, the history of the movement toward the establishment of Asian American Studies will be reviewed. Second, barriers to the

establishment will be discussed and analyzed. Third and finally, a conclusion will be made indicating implications and a further research agenda. This paper aims to demonstrate the relevance of a macro and global perspective in considering the issues of Asian and Pacific American students in US higher education, which tend to be viewed as micro-campus politics.

Asian American Studies is defined as "activities of research, teaching, and curriculum development related to the experiences of Asian and Pacific Peoples in America" (Hune, 1989). Although the term Asian American Studies includes Pacific American studies, the name of Asian American Studies is commonly used. From the next section, the term 'Asian Americans' will be used but it still includes Pacific Americans.

Ⅱ. History of Movement for Establishment of Asian American Studies

Origin and history

Asian American Studies was born through the Third World movement in 1968 – 1969 at San Francisco State College and similar events at other institutions, where the unprecedented coalition of minority students and white supporters demanded ethnic studies programs and open admissions through marches, picketing, and the taking over of university buildings (Hune, 1989; 1991). This movement was "an extension of wider protests of the time——Civil Rights, Black Power, Women's Liberation, Anti-war, La Raza, Native American Movement, and so on" (Hune, 1989). Coupled with major international events such as the Chinese Revolution, the Vietnam War, and the independence of the former colonies in Asia in the 1960's, higher education has been a major factor for Asian Americans in realizing social changes (Hune, 1989).

Behind the movement for Asian Americans Studies was an argument that

the organization and course content in US higher education reflected the superiority of Western culture, the universality of American values and interests, and the prevalence of a Eurocentric view (Hune, 1989). Asian Americans found themselves selectively represented and excluded from the decision-making processes (Hune, 1989).

The need for Asian American Studies was expressed in many ways: (1) To help Asian Americans understand themselves and their special problems in contemporary American society; (2) To have their history and culture reflected in the college curriculum; (3) To prepare them for general service to their respective communities; (4) To control the terms of the discourse as active participants in the shaping of history with an eye towards creating a more just and equal society (Okihiro, 1991; Hune, 1991).

As a result of the student activism, the University of California, Berkeley established an Ethnic Studies Department in 1969, which was the first of this kind in the history of US higher education (Wang, 1996).

The 1980's was a period when the time clock was reversed. Afraid of the keen international competition from the economic success of West Germany and Japan, conservative educators identified its problems to the decline of academic standards and the fragmented curriculum; thus, for them, diversity was a weakness and a potential threat to national security (Hune, 1991). These conservatives resorted to the establishment of a core curriculum as a common knowledge base, that was largely based on Western civilization studies (Hune, 1991). Apparently, this conservative movement was against the diversity drive and ethnic studies including Asian American Studies (Hune, 1991). On the other hand, liberal educators recognized the necessity of multicultural education because of the increasing diversification of the US population (Hune, 1991). They called for a balanced or mainstreamed curriculum with courses representative "of the Third World within or the Third World without" (Hune,

1991).

Through the ups and downs, by the end of the 1980's, Asian American Studies and other ethnic studies units had become, to some extent, permanent features at some American higher education institutions as distinct programs (Hune, 1991). Many Asian American Studies programs, large and small, are found mainly in West Coast universities, although since the 1980's, Asian American Studies has been proliferating in the East Coast. Moreover, in response to the demographic changes and other political considerations, college campuses which had previously ignored students demands for Asian American courses have begun to compete with one another to hire Asian American specialists (Hune, 1991).

However, some would say that they were ghettoized or at best marginalized (Hune, 1991). Wang (1996) laments that after almost three decades of a concerted effort, the presence of Asian American Studies in universities in California and other parts of the nation is "tokenism"at best, and worst of all, it is still considered intellectually marginal, if not, illegitimate in many universities.

Characteristics

A distinguishing characteristics of Asian American Studies is its increasing heterogeneity of conceptual and methodological approaches (Fugita, 1994). Fugita (1994) and Hune (1991) point out several factors within and outside of academia that have contributed to this trend: namely, (1) continuing emergence of the Pacific Rim studies (e.g., impact of recent immigrants from Southeast Asia on the Asian American communities), (2) the push for diversity and multiculturalism on many campuses, and (3) the efforts to restructure such broad areas as academic disciplines, research methodology, pedagogy, ethics, hiring practices, and fellowship.

However, despite the radical origins in the field, very few Asian American Studies scholars have truly challenged the dominant paradigms; worse, Okihiro (1991) argues that Asian American Studies often lacks an analytic framework and it has been filled by a preponderance of descriptive as opposed to analytical studies, and cultural rather than structural explanations.

Current status

Wang (1996) reviewed the current status of Asian American Studies on campuses across the nation. According to Wang (1996), in the US higher education system, academic hierarchy is in the following order: college or school (that has the highest rank in the hierarchy), department (which is considered as standard and necessary to have legitimacy), program (usually within a department or in an interdepartmental setting, which is less desirable, but workable), and projects or occasional courses (regarded as "a cheap pay-off at best and as an insult at worst"). The Asian American Studies fits this academic hierarchy as follows :

College or school There has never been a college or school of Asian American Studies on any campus in the US.
Department Only 3 out of 1,149 accredited 4-year colleges and universities have a department of Asian American Studies (San Francisco State University since 1969, California State University, Northridge since 1992, and University of California, Santa Barbara since 1995).
Program This is most often in an ethnic studies department, American studies department, or in a social science department, and it is found in quite a few leading universities, most of which are located in the West Coast. Geographically, the status of Asian American studies is as follows:

California

University of California system Formal program is housed in departments at Berkeley[1], Davis, Riverside, and Irvine, while inderdepartmental grouping of widely dispersed courses of Asian American Studies are found at UCLA, San Diego, and Santa Cruz.

California State University system There are programs of various sizes on a few of the 23 campuses.

Private universities in California Santa Clara University is among the first private colleges to offer courses, not programs on Asian Americans, within the department of ethnic studies. Small programs in Asian American Studies were created at Stanford in 1992 and the University of Southern California in 1993. Scattered courses are available in small liberal arts colleges like Occidental, Redlands and Pamona.

East Coast

—City College of New York is the first and only institution in the East Coast to have a formal program in Asian American Studies for the last 20 years (1970—). Despite long and hard demand by students for Asian American studies, Ivy League institutions have only offered occasional courses by available graduate students or visiting scholars. Cornell, after Asian Americans skyrocketed in number in the 1980's, established a small program with regular faculty in 1987. Brown did the same thing in 1989. Yale hired a full-time Asian Americanist in 1995. Princeton created a program in the fall 1996, after a highly publicized sit-in protest (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1995). There is no movement at Harvard despite the 20 years of continuous protests and demands by Asian American students. Harvard faculty members often advise Asian American students to take courses in East Asian Studies.

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[1] In 1993, Berkeley students demanded the elevation of the status of ethnic studies programs to the departmental status in a new Third World College (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1993).

Major public universities Asian American Studies is non-existent, except at Hunter College and Queens College in the City University of New York system (1993) and the University of Connecticut in Storrs (1992).

Small private liberal arts colleges Very modest programs were created at Swarthmore and Williams in 1992, and Amherst in 1993, usually having only one professor. No movement has occurred at small colleges such as Haverford, Bryn Mawr, Barnard, Smith, Wesleyan, Bowdoin, Middlebury, Colgate, Mount Holyoke and Vasser, even though they all have a more than significant Asian American presence.

South/Mountain

No Asian American Studies is found, except at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Arizona State University is exploring the possibility of having an Asian American Studies program.

Midwest

Small programs are found only in a few flagship campuses in public university systems like Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and occasional courses are offered in Illinois, Michigan State, Ohio, Indiana, and Iowa.

Northwest and Midwest

Very few Asian American Studies classes are available. University of Chicago with 26% Asian Americans in the undergraduate population has no Asian American Studies course.

Community Colleges

—Only 106 (fewer than 1%) out of 1,200 offers Asian American Studies courses.

The Case of University of Maryland

The University of Maryland, College Park, a flagship campus of the

University System of Maryland, is also new to Asian American Studies. There, Asian American students and other members of the community have worked for the establishment of an Asian American Studies Program since 1995 (Chu, 1997; Lassahn, 1997). The Asian American Student Union (AASU) has played a central role in this campaign. Because the AASU felt that the development of an Asian American studies program was not happening fast enough, and after a few semesters of small protests, they began to work in earnest again last semester (Fall 1996) (Lassahn, 1997). Under these conditions, a committee called Working for Asian American Studies was set up in the spring of 1996 to speed up the process along via demonstrations.

Currently, there are only three Asian American Studies courses offered each semester through the Asian American Studies Project (Choi, 1997). However, the Project's funding is only guaranteed for two years (1996−1998), which falls short of the five years what was originally requested (Chu, 1997). Lagdameo, AASU president, is quoted as saying, "the administration's lack of commitment to the Asian American Studies Project points to its questionable commitment to the Diversity Initiative" (Chu, 1997). Chang, a graduate adviser for AASU, is also quoted as saying,"Efforts to institutionalize the Asian American Studies Program have been blocked time and again by various administrators" (Chu, 1997).

Through negotiations with the administration officials including President Kirwan, a Task Force on Asian American Studies was set up in March 1997 to discuss how to implement a program. The Task Force consists of 14 faculty members and two undergraduate students, and the group was scheduled to submit a proposal to the provost by November 11, 1997 (Choi, 1997).

Lagdameo is quoted as saying, "This is very important——it will be the first time Asian American students showed any signs of activism" (Chu, 1997). Another effect of this campaign was the bonding of different Asian American

groups was realized for the first time (Choi, 1997). This case shows the similar patterns of the past movement at other institutions.

Ⅲ. Barriers to Establishment of Asian American Studies

As discussed earlier, the movement for Asian American Studies has faced various difficulties and hurdles. The main three barriers would include the resistance from traditional disciplines, distance with Asian Studies, and the eligibility of Asian American Studies as a distinct discipline. These barriers will be discussed next.

Resistance from traditional disciplines

As universities have attempted (with a great deal of internal struggle) to implement multiculturalism, it has resulted in a well organized and sophisticated counterattack by neoconservatives (Fugita, 1994). The issue of what combination of academic skills and political perspectives for Asian American Studies is most appropriate is still unresolved for many research and program committees (Fugita, 1994). Except on the increasing number of campuses which have Asian American Studies departments or centers that can hire, tenure, and promote entirely within their unit, there is a conflict with traditional departments about faculty (Fugita, 1994).

Distance between Asian Studies and Asian American Studies

Although they appear to be similar and closely linked, Asian studies is very different from Asian American Studies.

Though some scholars of Asian Studies, on a personal level, have some interaction with faculty and curricula in Asian American Studies, by and large most ignore Asian American Studies(Mazumdar, 1991). Asian American Studies

with its politics of protest and challenge to existing curricula of US higher education, has been seen as too political by a field used to thinking of politics only in distant lands (Mazumdar, 1991). The centrality of race and issues of racism in scholarship on Asian American Studies have also been uncomfortable topics for Asian Studies scholars who have tended to leave such issue unexamined (Mazumdar, 1991). With a few rare exceptions, Asian American Studies functions at best in an uneasy alliance with scholars of American history and civilization (Mazumdar, 1991). Asian American studies has been located as a subfield of immigrant history within the framework of American studies and stripped of its international links (Mazumdar, 1991).

This nationalist interpretation of immigration history has also been a more comfortable discourse for second-and third-generation Asian Americans (Mazumdar, 1991). Tired of being thought of as foreigners, these scholars have been particularly reluctant to identify with Asian studies and its pronouncements on the distinctiveness of Asian cultures in counterpoint to Euro-American culture (Mazumdar, 1991). As Asian American Studies programs have become more a part of formal academics, the links with the Asian community have weakened (Mazumdar, 1991). Second-and third-general Asian American scholars and other American scholars are unable to communicate with the very community whose voices and experiences they hope to represent (Mazumdar, 1991). To some extent, the response of many in Asian American Studies to this dilemma has been to distance themselves from their Asian heritage altogether (Mazumdar, 1991).

Increasingly under pressure for neglecting the history of recent immigrants, Asian American Studies programs have frequently turned to first-generation immigrant scholars from these communities to carry out the research and teaching (Mazumdar, 1991). But these scholars often have background in American history and are only marginally interested in the history of race

relations in this country or in ethnic groups other than their own (Mazumdar, 1991). Thus, Asian American Studies finds itself replicating the framework of area studies borrowed from Asian studies, with individuals primarily working on their own racial and ethnic subgroups (Mazumdar, 1991).

Another dimension of the difference between the two fields is their origin. Area Studies was created from the top-down in the elite structure with the support of the US government, while ethnic studies programs originated from the bottom-up as part of a protest against the existing educational structure that excluded them (Hune, 1991). Those trained in area studies tend to receive major financial support from public and private foundation sources, while those in ethnic studies receive very little support. Area studies has a high status on campus; ethnic studies may be viewed as politically necessary, but many still question their academic legitimacy (Hune, 1991). These facts, in addition to their almost exclusively minority faculties, result in their low status on campuses (Hu-DeHart, 1991). Asian American Studies and other ethnic studies are placed in a defensive posture, having repeatedly to justify their existence. Members are commonly marginalized compared to the members of traditional disciplines and are less frequently consulted even in their area of expertise (Okihiro, 1991). They have to fight for a minuscule piece of the university budget (Hu-DeHart, 1991).

Area studies includes the provision of experts on specific groups of the world, particularly the Third World (Hune, 1991). As these experts attempt to inform the US about Asia, Africa, and Latin America, improving its ability to influence change in these areas, they become agents of social control (Hune, 1991). The majority of these experts are white males who are outsiders and rarely representative of their regions (Hune, 1991). On the other hand, ethnic studies scholars tend to be insiders; they are members of the communities they study, many of whom are self-taught, retooled from other professions or

disciplines, who come from a background of community activism (Hune, 1991; Hu-DeHart, 1991). They become agents of resistance against the social order, seeking to use knowledge and information to empower their communities, to provide them with better services, and to limit further exploitation (Hune, 1991). Thus, although Asian American Studies has, since its inception, been pulled in the Asian Studies direction, the dominant force in its development has been Euro-American ideology (Okihiro, 1991). Asian American Studies has treated Asian Americans as a problematic group ("the Oriental question"), who are physically and culturally distinct from whites, and who could not blend into the mainstream (Okihiro, 1991).

Discipline issue

Another aspect of the barriers is how to accommodate Asian American Studies in the organizational structure in the US higher education system. The search for a place for Asian American Studies on college campuses has been primarily directed by three options: (1) Incorporation as subfields within established disciplines, (2) Formation of non-departmental interdisciplinary programs, or (3) Integrate Asian American Studies into a department which maintains ethnic studies as an independent discipline of study, i.e., an Ethnic Department (Liu, 1989).

Adoption into subfields meant the formation of topics and issues that are seen to be germane to, but not constituting the essences of any one discipline (Liu, 1989). Individuals who center their research and teaching on Asian American Studies to develop a comprehensive knowledge of various Asian groups in the US rather than on connecting racial/ethnic group dynamics to larger sociological concerns, run the risk of being considered marginal in their discipline (Liu, 1989).

The second choice is to find an interdisciplinary specific group or ethnic

studies program (Liu, 1989). Since these programs often lack departmental standing, their activities are likely to be considered marginal to the university's principal goals by other segments of the academic community (Liu, 1989). Without departmental status, such programs generally cannot directly hire tenure-tracked faculty and are limited in their ability to offer classes. Faculty are acquired either through joint appointments with established departments or through voluntary participation (Liu, 1989). Consequently, many of the participants in ethnic studies programs are often regarded by their peers as people with very narrow interests, iconoclasts, or even worse, second-rate scholars.

The first two directions have not been entirely satisfactory either for developing a comprehensive body of knowledge about racial groups within American society, or for the esteem of people choosing to concentrate their scholarly endeavors around these groups (Liu, 1989). Both approaches tend to accord the research and researchers supplementary status within the academic world.

As for the third option, the assertion is that Asian American Studies is part of a larger discipline, rather than a discipline in itself; however, this experience is insufficient to justify the establishment of an autonomous field knowledge (Liu, 1989). Furthermore, Asian American Studies program can exist as a self-contained department within the academic structure (Liu, 1989).

Ⅳ. Conclusion

The US university structure initially viewed Asian American Studies primarily as a form of compensatory education that added to, but not altered the institution (Hune, 1991). Asian Americans had to continue to endure intellectual contempt, and a lack of representation in the academic mainstream (Wang, 1996). Thus, high numbers of Asian American students on many

campuses across the nation have had only minimal, if not, negligible impact on the development of Asian American Studies (Wang, 1996). At this point, no university or college has volunteered to set up an Asian American department; therefore, Asian Americans have had to and must continue to fight for real departmental status, i.e., the right to hire and tenure scholars in their fields, and validate their own scholarship (Hu-DeHart, 1991). Therefore, simply setting up some programs or departments will not automatically address the central intellectual issue. How Asian American Studies functions as an agent of change in the intellectual and institutional environment will still depend on content and approaches.

On the positive side, Asian American Studies programs are nurturing a new generation of Asian American scholars that will ultimately lay a foundation toward the reconceptualization of American history and identity (Okihiro, 1991). Asian American Studies gives Asian Americans a new body of knowledge and scholarship. In addition, solidarity across racial and ethnic minorities have emerged and there is a new identity of politics among minorities. Frequently one of the positive outcomes has been the creation of more faculty positions in the program or at least in related fields (Fugita, 1994).

Further research

Most Asian American students are still denied access to courses in Asian American Studies (Wang, 1996). It would be useful for in-depth analysis to get opinions of ordinary (not activists) Asian American students and others regarding the establishment of Asian American Studies.

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